

Book Review
Richard Leonard S.J.

An Unusual Life
Changes in Religious Life
An Insider's Perspective
1921-2021

Catharine Courtney rsm

The original meaning of the phrase “politics is local” emerged from parliamentary elections where, for all of the larger agenda of a political party’s platform, its electoral fortunes rose or fell on the application of its policies by local people in a local area. What is true of party politics is true of ecclesiastical politics as well. Catharine Courtney’s “An Unusual Life” charts the local story of a woman at the centre of the most tumultuous period in the Catholic Church since the Reformation, grounded in a time and place.

This book is not written by a keen and intelligent observer, as keen and intelligent as the work certainly is. The subtitle charts the focus of the narrative: “Changes in a Religious Order: An Insider’s Perspective 1951–2021”. Catharine was, for decades, a major local player in the Brisbane Catholic Church and its social and political relationships within and without that community. It may be hard for people outside Brisbane to understand the power and importance of the Sisters of Mercy in that city. While other religious orders were prominent in various service deliveries in all Australian cities, no other group came close to the leadership the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy provided in the church’s three major ministries: education; healthcare; and social services. At one stage numbering over 700 sisters, they were without peer in being the largest provider in these sectors for generations. What makes this life unusual is not just the arc of the story of a religious woman in a society that passionately embraced secularism, but that this life is being lived (it’s not over yet!) in a church and world that is unrecognizable from where it all began for Catharine.

Born in Brisbane in 1932, Catharine was Sr Mary Benedict RSM by her 20th birthday. A graduate in science, she taught high school for 12 years until she was made a Secondary School Principal aged 37. By 43 she was to become the Mother General of the All Hallows Foundation of the Sisters of Mercy It's hard to imagine a more demanding time to lead a religious congregation than for the six years she did from 1975 – 1980. With good reason, the 1970s in religious life is sometimes called “the great exodus.” It was not just the loss of talent, however, from the ranks of those who no longer needed to serve Christ in poverty, chastity and obedience, it was a parting from former hierarchies, the old securities of dress codes, names and titles, rules, ways of life and ministries. Some of this was embraced enthusiastically, some of it too quickly, and some of it was forced upon the group. While the radical shifts occurred, some members were bewildered by the changes and fearful for the future. It was a tough time to be in charge.

After her time in congregational leadership, Catharine did graduate studies and later lectured in social ethics. She practiced what she preached, working and living at the House for Justice and Mercy in Brisbane which cared and advocated for women with many and various needs. Her life as a nun really took an unusual focus when she became the Chair of the Queensland Government's Ministerial Advisory Committee on Non State Schools, served on the Board of State Corrective Services Commission, and joined the Mercies Advocacy Reference Group in support of refugees, the homeless, and indigenous Australians. In 2013 she represented the Australian Sisters of Mercy at the UN's General Assembly on the Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

The world Catharine Courtney grew up in has gone. The Church she has served as a nun for over 70 years is in crisis. *An Unusual Life* chronicles what can be best in Catholic religious life: being grateful to the past while not being held prisoner to it; being as critical of oppressive structures inside as well as outside of the church and calling for them to be reformed; reading the signs of the times; being

adaptable; seeing change as an opportunity; understanding diminishment as the shoots of new growth; and living in hope.

Catharine's critical and unfussy faith sustains her to this day, always open to what the Spirit is saying here and now: "... I think of God as Mystery, profoundly bound to a universe in ways beyond our comprehension, and capable of unconditional love such as the most creative imagination cannot begin to grasp. In short, this is a love that embraces all of humanity and indeed every living form.... In God's Providence here is yet another possibility to contribute to the rebirth in the future of a reformed church enriched by some Christian disciples embracing publicly this Unusual Life. To quote St Paul: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered the human heart to know what God has prepared for those who love Him."

An Unusual Life is a real service, but not just because it portrays one woman's fascinating and rich life and ministry, but moreover because it charts social and religious history through personal narrative located in time and place. It's an arresting book because we get to see where we have come, and we're challenged to glimpse with courage where we yet may go.

This book is testament to how Catharine Courtney has been prophetic for a very long time.

Richard Leonard SJ

Father Leonard is the author of 12 books including *Where the hell is God?*, *The law of love: modern words, for ancient wisdom*, and *What are we doing on Earth, for Christ's sake?*